

Heterophonic Musical Morphology of Dong Grand Song and Its Indigenous Cultural Context

Introduction

For many years, the traditional folk songs of China's ethnic groups have often been understood as consisting primarily of single melodic lines and simple structures, appearing comparatively sparse alongside the intricate techniques of the European harmonic tradition. Before the 1950s, Western ethnomusicologists generally knew little about multipart folk music in China. Some scholars even asserted that "Chinese folk songs are exclusively monophonic." For a time, this view dominated Western scholarly understandings of Chinese music.

In 1953, Xiao Jiaju, Xue Liang, and other members of the Guizhou Musicians Association first collected and documented Dong Grand Song while participating in land reform work in Yandong Township, Liping County, in southeastern Guizhou. Dong Grand Song is characterized by heterophony, a distinctive form of multipart music. Performed without a conductor or instrumental accompaniment, it relies entirely on oral instruction from song masters (*geshi*) and the tacit understanding developed through sustained practice among singers to coordinate its vocal parts.

Heterophony is a distinct musical texture, differing from monophony as well as from homophony and contrapuntal polyphony. Drawing on the principles of this texture, Dong Grand Song creates a distinctive world of multipart singing within its own cultural context, outside the conceptual framework of Western harmony.

Grounded in analysis of musical scores, and drawing on fieldwork in the Dong villages of Xiaohuang, Dali, Zaidang, and Zhaoxing and interviews with local song masters, this paper approaches the music from its own materials. It moves from the macro level of formal structure, through the meso level of textural morphology, to the micro level of vertical harmonic intervals, to examine the musical thinking embodied in this structural logic. Building on this analysis of the music itself, the paper then turns to the Dong's indigenous cultural background to explore the cultural roots from which Grand Song emerged and has endured. It considers three aspects: how

Drum Tower culture shaped the sense of order in Grand Song, how the natural environment influenced its sonic character, and the Dong people's own aesthetic preferences in singing.

Musical Structure

In the Dong language, a single Grand Song is called a "mei", and each mei is made up of several "jiao", meaning "section." The jiao is the basic structural unit of the Grand Song. Based on the manner of singing and where phrases begin and end, it can be divided into three parts: "qidun", "gengduo", and "lasuo".

The qidun is the solo opening of each section. It is sung by a choir member with a strong memory, a good sense of pitch, and a high level of artistic cultivation, who sets the key, cues the others, and leads. The gengduo is the passage where the soloist's melody merges into the choral parts and the high and low voices begin singing the lyrics with semantic content (that is, words that carry actual meaning) together. It is also the point at which the whole song enters its choral stage. The lasuo is the closing part of the jiao, where the song shifts from united singing to divided parts, and it is sung entirely on vocables (syllables or words that carry no specific meaning in singing and serve mainly to fill out the melody, extend a phrase, or enhance the vocal effect). The low part mostly holds sustained long notes, while the high part improvises freely according to the vocal contour of the vocables. At the end the two parts land on the same pitch, forming a clear cadence.

Example 1. "Squirrel Song" (*Songshu Ge*, 松鼠歌), mm. 1-14

Solo

sui neng zhuan zhuan yu dang wu guan duo

Chorus

shai yu nuo jia nuo dan ding mian xue ai xia ai

Singer A

jin dang ya er ke o ya lie ai

Singer B

yi ya yi ai ai ya

er ke er ke o ya lie ai zhu

This passage constitutes a complete *jiao*. Measure 1 forms the *qidun*, a brief solo opening. Measures 2–7 comprise the *gengduo*, in which the song moves from monophonic singing to a two-part texture. The upper and lower voices sing meaningful lyrics together, marking the beginning of vocal convergence. Measures 8–13 form the *lasuo*, where the voices begin to diverge. The lower voice sustains a single pitch while the upper voice elaborates freely, with both parts singing entirely in vocables. Finally, the two voices converge in unison, bringing the section to a close. The relationship between the voices within each *jiao* thus follows a process of separation and reunion. A single singer begins alone, after which the ensemble joins in. The lower voice then provides a sustained foundation for the upper voice’s free elaboration, before both voices return to unison. Each *jiao* therefore completes a cycle of solo singing, convergence, divergence, and renewed convergence. A complete Grand Song consists of several *jiao* linked together. As each section ends, the next begins with its own *qidun*, *gengduo*, and

lasuo. This recurring sequence constitutes the song's overall form. The number of measures in the *qidun*, *gengduo*, and *lasuo* varies across different Grand Songs. Generally, however, the *qidun* is the shortest section, serving primarily to establish pitch and rhythm. The *gengduo* and *lasuo* are longer and roughly equal in length, forming the core sections in which Dong Grand Song's most distinctive musical features emerge.

This structure is relatively structured overall, yet it leaves considerable room for free elaboration within its broader framework. The *jiao* functions as a modular unit composed of the three sections described above: *qidun*, *gengduo*, and *lasuo*. A complete Grand Song is built through repeated use of this module, with new lyrics introduced in each repetition. Its length is therefore open-ended. A song may contain four or five sections or several dozen, and adding or removing a section does not disrupt its overall structure. This structure also distinguishes the functions of text and music. The *gengduo* uses meaningful lyrics to convey narrative content, while the *lasuo* uses vocables to create expressive effects through sound itself rather than through the meaning of words. The final return to unison also serves as an important structural marker. Because this gesture recurs at the end of each section, listeners can clearly recognize sectional boundaries even without understanding the lyrics. The organization of heterophony unfolds within this framework. Its clearly defined structural hierarchy and rigorous order coexist with the flexibility afforded by modular construction, creating a balance between freedom and structural discipline.

Heterophonic Texture

The preceding discussion of structure shows that Dong Grand Song consists of three sections—*qidun*, *gengduo*, and *lasuo*—in which the vocal parts alternately converge and diverge. In the main body of the song, where the lyrics convey narrative content, heterophonic techniques predominate once the lead singer joins the chorus. This texture consists of a melody and its simultaneously sounding variants, which together express a unified musical idea. The principle of variation operates as follows: while the lower part sings the underlying melody, the upper part improvises creatively above it, periodically branching away from the foundational part in melody or rhythm. This section examines the specific forms of heterophonic texture in Grand Song.

The upper part's melodic variations frequently branch off from the unison melody for brief passages, giving rise to several distinct patterns of interaction between the voices.

Example 2. "Casting the Net Song" (*Sawang Ge*, 撒网歌), mm. 146-148.

146

er hai jia ha yu hu jie xing lie a ha er jie xing lie hai zhu

In similar motion, the two voices often begin on the same pitch and move in the same direction, forming varying intervals. In the example above, the upper and lower voices sing the same melody in unison in measure 146. In measure 147, they shift to similar motion. The upper voice follows F–G–G–F–E $\flat$ and E $\flat$ –G–F–E $\flat$, while the lower voice follows F–G–E $\flat$ –C and C–F–E $\flat$ –C. Both exhibit an “up–down–down” pattern, maintaining a shared direction of movement. In measure 148, the upper voice follows G–G–F–E $\flat$ –B $\flat$ –C, while the lower voice follows E $\flat$ –B $\flat$ –C–B $\flat$ –C, producing an “up–down–down–up” pattern with broadly similar melodic contours. This type of similar motion generally lasts for only a few measures.

Example 3. "Song of the Cicada" (*Chan Zhi Ge*, 蝉之歌), mm. 59-65.

59

lang lang lang lang lang lang lang lang lang lang lang lang lang lang lang lang lang lang lang lang lang lang lang er zhu

In similar motion, the two voices move in the same direction, but the interval between them does not necessarily remain constant. One particular type of similar motion is parallel motion, in which the voices maintain a constant intervallic relationship, identical rhythms, and matching melodic contours while sounding at different pitch levels. In the passage sung to the vocables “lang, lang, lang” in the example above, the upper voice sings G and the lower voice

sings D from measures 60 to 62, forming a perfect fourth. The melodic patterns and intervallic relationships are almost identical, differing only in pitch level, thus exemplifying parallel motion. The distinction between parallel motion and similar motion more generally lies in whether the interval remains constant. In the example from “Casting the Net Song,” on the third beat of measure 146, the upper voice ascends from E $\flat$ to G by a major third, while the lower voice ascends from C to F by a perfect fourth. Although both voices move upward, they move by different intervals, making this an instance of general similar motion. Parallel motion, by contrast, requires the interval between the voices to remain constant throughout. This strict form of similar motion, characterized by a constant intervallic relationship, is also relatively common in Grand Song.

Example 4. "Cai Song" (*Cai Ge*, 才歌), mm. 103-106



Another type of voice leading is contrary motion, in which the two voices often begin on the same pitch and move in opposite directions. In the example above, the voices diverge from a unison F: the upper voice ascends to G while the lower voice descends to D, creating contrary motion. They then reunite on F. The upper voice subsequently ascends through G to A, while the lower voice descends through D to C, again moving in opposite directions. Finally, the upper voice descends from A back to F as the lower voice rises from C to D, bringing the passage to a close through contrary motion.

Example 5. "Song of Advice" (*Quangao Ge*, 劝告歌), mm. 10-14



The final type of voice leading is oblique motion: one voice usually remains on a fixed pitch while the other branches away from their shared starting pitch, forming a succession of different intervals. In the second measure of the excerpt, both voices move from the grace note E to C#, establishing a common point of departure. The lower voice then sustains C# while the upper voice continues to vary above it. The two voices thus diverge, producing a typical example of oblique motion.

Example 6. "Flowers Bloom in Spring" (*Chunshi Huakai*, 春时花开), mm. 1-14

Solo

Chorus

chun xi lao da qian dong ba mei deng dong jia xi

5

lao jia da hua jia zhu jin jia jin ba jia mei luo jia di

8

dan ting e a yang a yang a er jin dang ya er ke a ya lie

A

12

B

er hai xing hai hei hai xing a ya er ke er ke a ya lie hei zu

The first measure is the solo opening, or *qidun*, which briefly establishes the starting pitch and pulse. Measures 2–8 constitute the *gengduo*. Moving from the F sung in unison at the

end of measure 2 into measure 3, the upper voice rises to C while the lower voice remains on F, creating oblique motion. On the first beat of measure 5, both voices sing G and F in unison. They subsequently diverge in contrary motion, with the upper voice rising to B $\flat$ and the lower voice descending to E $\flat$. In measure 6, the first beat is sung in unison, followed by contrary motion on the second beat. On the third beat, the voices move together in similar motion. On the fourth beat, the upper voice ascends while the lower voice remains on C, producing oblique motion. In measure 7, the first two beats feature oblique motion; on the third beat, both voices descend in similar motion, before returning to oblique motion on the final beat. Measure 8 restores choral unison. The *lasuo* begins in measure 11: the lower voice sustains a long note while the upper voice carries the melody, creating oblique motion. At the end of the phrase, the two voices reunite in unison, bringing the section to a close.

Of these three types of motion, oblique motion occurs most frequently. All three proceed from a shared pitch. These patterns reveal the specific ways in which the voices diverge and converge within the heterophonic texture, as well as the duration of each episode. This repeated separation and reunion is an important feature of voice leading in the heterophonic practice of Dong Grand Song.

Intervallic Relationships between the Voices

Dong Grand Song is predominantly sung in two parts, whose vertical relationships can be broadly divided into two categories: unisons and other intervals. When the voices sing in unison, they sound the same pitch, highlighting their shared melodic framework and producing a unified, focused sonority. When they separate onto different pitches, the distance between them introduces changes in harmonic color, giving the music a sense of layering and depth. If the voices remain at different pitches throughout, however, listeners gradually become accustomed to this contrast, weakening its effect. When the voices continually alternate between unison and other intervals, the contrast becomes particularly distinct: unison, in turn, accentuates the depth created by the other intervals. These changing distances between the voices further contribute to the characteristic divergence and convergence of Dong Grand Song's heterophonic texture.

Unisons are straightforward: the upper and lower voices sing the same pitch. Although other intervals are more varied, the types used remain limited. Dong Grand Song is generally

based on the pentatonic *yu* mode, with a relatively narrow range of a seventh or less. Its common intervals therefore include major and minor thirds, perfect fourths and fifths, and major sixths. Dissonant intervals such as major seconds and minor sevenths occur less frequently.

The distance between the notes of an interval directly shapes its sonority. Thirds, for example, are the most common intervals. Their repeated appearance reinforces the tonal character of the *yu* mode and accentuates its gentle quality. The full, pleasing sonorities of major and minor thirds also contribute to Dong Grand Song's harmonious quality. Perfect fourths and fifths produce a smooth, consonant sonority. Although the major second is dissonant, its brief appearance lends forward momentum to the melody.

Example 7. "Playing the Fool" (*Zhuang Daisha*, 装呆傻), mm. 16-26

16 Solo Chorus

ji ning song dou men mao you gao xiang ling jin bang sha gong kong lei li wa mao lang la li kang

20

ning jie song dou men mao shang gao xiang ling jin bang sha gong xiang dou ka

24

wu jin de bang mao bu jie ya kan ma lun ha lun ha

On the second beat of measure 17, a minor third appears before immediately resolving to unison. Measure 20 presents a major second, a perfect fourth, a major third, and a minor third in succession, before returning to unison as the melody continues. Measure 24 features a major second, a perfect fourth, a minor third, and a perfect fifth. Measure 25 contains minor thirds, major thirds, and perfect fifths. Measure 26 is similarly rich in harmonic intervals, including minor thirds, major seconds, and major thirds. Although these measures differ in the intervals they employ, each returns to unison following a succession of contrasting intervals, allowing the melody to continue.

The duration of these episodes of divergence and convergence varies with the musical content and the singers' habits, making it difficult to generalize about which is more prevalent. Yet this relatively free alternation allows changes in intervallic distance to impart different colors to the voices. The varying frequency of these alternations, together with the different durations of unisons and other intervals, is central to the formation of heterophonic texture.

The Indigenous Cultural Context of Dong Society

The preceding three sections have examined the manifestations and internal organization of Dong Grand Song's heterophonic texture at the levels of musical form, multipart organization and texture, and vertical intervals. Building on this musical analysis, the discussion now turns to a cultural perspective to explore possible connections between Dong society's cultural context and the forms of its heterophonic music.

The Influence of Drum Tower Culture

The drum tower is an important gathering place in Dong society. As the tallest building and communal center in a Dong village, it serves multiple functions, including socializing, discussing village affairs, resting, and teaching and singing songs. It can therefore be understood as a crucial spatial setting for the early development of Dong Grand Song.

The drum tower's spatial character can be described as "semi-enclosed." Whereas singing among other ethnic groups often takes place spontaneously during breaks from work or in the fields, the drum tower's semi-enclosed interior shields singers from outdoor distractions. Dong Grand Song thus develops through more than spontaneous improvisation: singers can sit down, recall the scenes and sounds of their work at leisure, and repeatedly compose and refine their songs. This combination of spatial organization and social function has enabled Grand Song to develop carefully organized structures and complex melodic arrangements.

Furthermore, the drum tower's fixed, semi-enclosed space, together with its public functions as a place for social interaction and communal deliberation, gives it a sense of order and solemnity. Its atmosphere bears some resemblance to that of a small Western chapel. During rehearsals, this setting discourages casual or unfocused participation, allowing singers to concentrate on learning and performing songs and to refine coordination between the voices. The

sense of order and ritual reinforced by this permanent setting has, to some extent, shaped the structural rigor of Dong Grand Song.

The Ecological Environment

The natural environment of southern Dong villages provides an important foundation for the musical characteristics of Dong Grand Song. The tradition is concentrated in the counties of Liping, Congjiang, and Rongjiang in Guizhou, together with Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County in Guangxi, in the region where Guizhou, Hunan, and Guangxi meet. This area marks the transition from the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau to the hills of Guangxi. Mountains predominate, with relatively little level ground, and the varied terrain includes deeply incised river valleys and steep ridges. Its mid-subtropical climate is warm and humid throughout the year, with abundant rainfall and favorable conditions for farming. These climatic and geographical conditions support dense mountain forests, with Chinese fir and bamboo groves widespread across the landscape. Streams flow through the mountains, while birdsong and insect calls can be heard throughout the seasons. This landscape has provided the natural setting for generations of Dong life while gradually shaping people's perception of sound and nurturing Grand Song's imitation and recreation of natural sounds. The ecological environment of Dong villages provides more than musical inspiration: it also shapes the thinking and sonic organization underlying their heterophony. Celebrating nature and drawing extensively on natural sounds as musical material are important characteristics of Dong Grand Song. Singers frequently combine sustained low tones with ornamented variations in the upper voice. The lower voice holds long notes in imitation of flowing mountain water, while the upper voice rises, falls, and leaps in imitation of birdsong.

This imitation of nature is also deeply embedded in individual songs. From the widely known "Song of the Cicada" to the "Frog Song" sung by children, many grand songs originate in the perception and imitation of natural sounds. Moved by the pleasing sounds around them, Dong people hum them spontaneously; over time, these vocal imitations develop into established tunes passed down through generations. In "Song of the Cicada," for example, the most striking feature is the use of onomatopoeic vocables to imitate cicada calls. The opening section contains meaningful lyrics, followed by an extended passage of vocables that repeatedly uses the syllable

lang to reproduce the sound of cicadas. The Chinese character used to represent *lang* functions as a phonetic transcription. When Dong women sing this syllable, the tip of the tongue vibrates rapidly and evenly against the upper alveolar ridge, producing a bright, forward resonance in the repeated *lang, lang, lang, lang*. The resulting sound closely resembles the actual timbre of a cicada.

During performance, the lower voice provides a sustained foundation, while lead singers take turns carrying and ornamenting the upper melody. The recurring *lang* syllable evokes golden cicadas calling in succession among the trees in summer, repeatedly taking flight and settling again. Many of Grand Song's ornamental variations originate in this attentive capture and artistic transformation of natural sounds. Natural sounds themselves contain layers of higher and lower pitches. To some extent, this layering drawn from nature has also shaped the tendency of individual voices within the heterophonic texture to move independently and vary freely.

Expressions of Dong Aesthetics in Music

A prominent feature of Dong musical aesthetics is the pursuit of richly layered sound, exemplified by the use of vocables and the melodic passages sung to them. In many grand songs that celebrate nature or incorporate natural elements, these vocables and vocal passages are as important as meaningful lyrics and melody. As discussed earlier, in many songs imitating animals or other natural sounds, vocables occupy an even greater proportion of the music than meaningful lyrics. Through these extensive vocable passages, singing groups demonstrate their ability to shape sound. The material for such passages often derives from animal calls, as in "Song of the Cicada," "Cicada Song," and "The Cuckoo Heralds Spring." In these works, vocables and their melodic elaborations virtually constitute the core of the music itself.

By comparison, narrative grand songs and songs of moral instruction contain more meaningful lyrics and fewer vocables, since they must tell stories and communicate moral teachings. Even in these genres, however, singers incorporate substantial vocable passages to enrich the music's layers. This commitment to richness of texture reflects distinctive Dong aesthetic preferences and also makes Grand Song demanding to learn and perform.

The same pursuit of layered richness extends into many other aspects of Dong culture, with clothing providing a visible example. Dong women's ceremonial attire is characterized by multiple overlapping layers. Silver ornaments are worn on the head, neck, chest, waist, hands, and feet, while the collars and cuffs of garments combine blue, white, and other colors in successive layers. A silver floral headdress, for example, takes a form resembling a drum tower: the silver hairpin rises highest at the crown of the head, with colored balls arranged symmetrically beneath it on either side. The layered arrangement of clothing and the rich textures of Grand Song reflect a similar aesthetic sensibility—a preference for multiple overlapping layers and complex resonances.

Grand Song's aesthetic ideals also emerge in the balance between freedom in performance and structural rigor. Since Dong Grand Song is performed without a conductor or instrumental accompaniment, precision and unity depend on tacit coordination among ensemble members, with the lead singer playing a crucial role. The lead singer establishes the initial pitch and pulse and often introduces improvised ornaments and subtle variations during the performance. The performance as a whole therefore allows considerable freedom. Many rhythmic and melodic details are not rigidly fixed but respond flexibly to the lead singer and the ensemble in the moment. This freedom nevertheless operates within clear boundaries: Grand Song follows a formal structure established in advance, and all improvisation and variation must unfold within that framework. The balance between freedom and rigor thus constitutes another dimension of its aesthetic ideal.

Conclusion

Drawing on score analysis and fieldwork, this article has examined the characteristics and underlying logic of heterophony in Dong Grand Song at three levels: musical form, multipart organization and texture, and vertical harmonic intervals. The dialectical relationship between divergence and convergence runs through every level of the music. At the macro level, *qidun*, *gengduo*, and *lasuo* form a cycle of solo singing, convergence, divergence, and renewed convergence, creating a modular structure whose units can be repeatedly linked together. At the intermediate level, similar, oblique, and contrary motion give this cycle concrete expression in the movement of the voices. At the micro level, repeated shifts between unison and other

intervals express divergence and convergence through specific intervallic distances. By creating and dissolving distances between the voices, the heterophonic thinking of Dong Grand Song repeatedly realizes these patterns across structure, texture, and sonority, while leaving room for improvised melodic variation within a rigorous framework.

Building on this analysis, the article has further examined the cultural roots of this musical thinking and developed a preliminary argument linking them to drum tower culture, the ecological environment, and Dong aesthetic preferences. The semi-enclosed character and sense of order associated with the drum tower provide a spatial foundation for the creation and transmission of Grand Song. The mountainous environment and its natural sounds supply a perceptual basis for the distinct roles of the upper and lower voices within the heterophonic texture. The Dong preference for richly layered sound finds expression in the songs' vocables and associated vocal passages, as well as in the overlapping layers of their clothing.

Dong Grand Song and Dong culture undoubtedly possess a distinctive appeal. I hope that this article will serve as a starting point for further, more detailed exploration of Dong Grand Song and other forms of Dong music. Through attention to historical origins and social development, alongside comparisons across cultures and regions, I hope to better understand the characteristics of Dong musical culture, the factors that have shaped it, and its development.

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